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# McNamara on Record, Reluctant, on Vietnam

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WASHINGTON, May 15 — In two days of questioning this spring, Robert S. McNamara said he ceased to believe that the Vietnam War could be won not long after American combat troops were committed to the conflict in 1965.

Mr. McNamara, the Secretary of Defense in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, who was known for his appetite for facts and figures, also said he lost faith in the military statistics that he helped create because "they made no sense."

Mr. McNamara has resolutely refused to discuss in public the Vietnam War and his role in it since he resigned as Secretary of Defense on Feb. 28, 1968. However, in late March of this year he was subpoenaed to give a deposition in the libel suit brought by Gen. William C. Westmoreland against CBS Inc.

The suit arose after CBS News suggested in a documentary broadcast Jan. 23, 1982, that the American military, and specifically General Westmoreland, had altered figures on the strength of enemy forces in Vietnam to make it appear that the United States was winning the war. The general, now retired, commanded American forces in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968.

## Reluctant and Unresponsive

The initial McNamara deposition runs to 444 pages, and lawyers said he would probably be called for further deposition.

Despite Mr. McNamara's strong reluctance to discuss the war at all and his apparent unresponsiveness to many questions, his deposition portrays a public servant unwilling to come to terms with his past record and a one-time policy maker who grudgingly continued to administer what he believed was a lost war.

At one point in the two-day questioning, Mr. McNamara said he would resist to the limits of his legal power having to discuss the war. After an "off-the-record" interlude,

in which his own attorney may have convinced him that he had little recourse, he went on to give what students of the Vietnam conflict may regard as his most complete accounting of his stewardship.

However, early in the deposition, taken in Washington, he said: "I want it clear on the record that you are extracting these answers from me against my wishes. I have never spoken publicly on Vietnam. I have no intention of doing so."

Mr. McNamara said the events in question occurred 20 years ago and "my memory is imperfect."

"I was a participant in a decision-making process," he added. "I do not believe a participant should be judge of his own actions or the validity of those actions."

## Unable to Recall His Opinions

On more than 100 occasions, Mr. McNamara protested that he could not recall his opinions or those of others during the war or basic facts about the conflict. At one point he said he was unable to recall the opinions of any other major policy maker. Yet, at other points in the deposition, his memory seemed more firm.

Under the persistent questioning of David Boies, a lawyer in the New York firm of Cravath, Swaine & Moore, which represents CBS, Mr. McNamara made these points:

QOf the war, he testified, "I did not believe it could be won militarily." He said he came to this view in 1966 "if not earlier." He later said that it might have been 1965.

QHe was almost contemptuous of the bombing program in North Vietnam, testifying that he doubted it had any chance of forcing North Vietnam either to end the war or to negotiate. He said he never recommended a sharply reduced bombing schedule but, instead, tried to hold bombing to moderate levels.

QFor a considerable period of time," the former Defense Secretary said, he and President Johnson disagreed about the conduct of the war and "eventually came to a parting of the ways." But he professed to be totally unable to recall his discussions with the President before leaving office. Did he resign or was he asked to do so? "I'm not sure I decided. It would have been the President who decides." Mr. McNamara asserted

the President never gave him an explanation of the necessity for his departure from the Pentagon.

QThroughout 1967, Mr. McNamara testified, he successfully resisted a request by General Westmoreland that 200,000 troops be added to the more than 500,000 troops already fighting in Vietnam. "I believed it would carry human and political costs disproportionate to any military advantages it would bring," the former Secretary said. "At a certain point one would come to the conclusion, as I did in 1967, that we had gone as far as we could or should to assist the South Vietnamese to help themselves, and if they couldn't we shouldn't go further."

QAt one point Mr. McNamara said it was fair and correct to say that he had asked for more and more statistics by which to measure the conduct of the war. He added, "Statistics are nothing other than the means of conveying information and recognizing that information is frequently imprecise; it is better to have as much coverage as one can get."

QBut he subsequently stressed and re-stressed his growing disenchantment with the military reporting from Vietnam. "Because," he said, "you couldn't reconcile the number" of the enemy, "the level of infiltration, the body count and the resultant figures. It just didn't add up. I never did get the answer, because there weren't any answers." Mr. McNamara protested he could never get "a balanced equation."

This was a reference to the mathematical inconsistency, often noted by

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